



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Liberia

Ellis, S.; Mehler, A.; Melber, H.; Walraven, K. van

Citation

Ellis, S. (2005). Liberia. In A. Mehler, H. Melber, & K. van Walraven (Eds.), *Africa Yearbook: Politics, Economy and Society South of the Sahara in [..]* (pp. 101-109). Leiden/Boston: Brill.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9625>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9625>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Liberia



This was intended to be the year that Liberia made major steps towards peace, stability and the rehabilitation of its government after 14 years or more of war. At the beginning of the year, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), established on 1 October 2003, was still building up to its full strength of some 14,785 soldiers, 215 military observers, 755 civilian police, 360 uniformed police units, 635 international staff, 798 national staff and 431 United Nations volunteers. The UN General Assembly had been asked to appropriate some \$ 840 m for UNMIL for the 12 months beginning 1 August 2003, indicating the size of the budget required for the world's largest UN mission. UNMIL enjoyed a robust Chapter 7 mandate, with authority to disarm and reintegrate former fighters, to assist in the reconstruction of Liberia's national police force and to assist in reestablishing national authority throughout the country. The UN mission was empowered to work with the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL), an interim administration established by the **Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)** signed in Accra on 18 August 2003 between the former government of Liberia and the two main armed factions opposed to it. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement was intended to put a final stop to the war that had been fought in Liberia in fits and starts since the 1980s. It was made possible by the departure into exile of Liberia's elected president, Charles Taylor, on 11 August 2003 and his replacement by a government composed of members of the three armed factions that had been

disputing control of the country, under a chairman of their choosing, the former businessman C. Gyude Bryant.

By the end of the year, both the National Transitional Government of Liberia under its chairman, Bryant, and UNMIL under special representative Jacques Paul Klein, an American diplomat and former air force general, were sticking to their **timetable** for organising general and presidential elections in October 2005, prior to the inauguration of a new elected government in January 2006. However, many observers, including senior UNMIL officials, were concerned that Liberia's rehabilitation was being blown off course by an unduly compressed timetable, vast corruption in the Liberian government and mistakes by the UN administration. There was a notable loss of confidence among international donors, whose attention was diverted during the course of the year to other emergencies, pushing Liberia down the international priority list.

Domestic Politics

Liberia's **transitional government**, inaugurated on 14 October 2003, contains 21 cabinet ministers. These, plus a range of other senior government positions, are members or nominees of Liberia's former armed factions. One of the three such groups involved is the former government of Liberia, previously led by ex-President Charles Taylor, itself originally formed from an armed faction active in the 1990s. The other two components of the interim government are Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). These two armed groups had inflicted a military defeat on Taylor's government in June–July 2003 with significant (although unavowed) backing from sub-regional powers, especially Guinea, and discreet support from the US government. The same three factions were also able to appoint members of Liberia's National Assembly, although this also contained representatives drawn from Liberian 'civil society.' However, some of the civil society representatives could more accurately be described as politicians not aligned with any of the three former armed factions.

As a consequence of these arrangements negotiated in Accra, the transitional government contained many familiar faces from the war, such as Defence Minister Daniel Chea, who had held the same position under President Taylor, or Labour Minister J. Laveli Supuwood, who had also been a senior member of Taylor's armed faction before joining LURD, or MODEL leader Thomas Yaya Nimely, appointed as foreign minister after discreet pressure from Côte d'Ivoire's President Laurent Gbagbo, a key backer of MODEL. UNMIL chief Jacques Klein was quoted as saying that "each of the warring factions got ministries which are then staffed top to bottom with their people." In fact, deputy and assistant ministers do not come from the same faction as the minister, and ministers and their deputies and assistants often disagreed with one another in consequence. This contributed to the general **dysfunction** of government.

The nature of the transitional government had a notable impact on some of the key issues affecting reconstruction. Justice Minister Kabinah Janneh, a leading member of LURD, pronounced himself opposed to a war crimes court. Chairman Bryant, although not himself a member of any of the former armed factions, also publicly expressed opposition to the establishment of a truth commission or a war crimes court, although a truth commission was on the way to being constituted by year's end. Other ministers and senior officials too were opposed to prosecutions for crimes committed during the civil war. This was unsurprising inasmuch as some of Liberia's most notorious **warlords** held key posts and were to be seen driving around Monrovia with official escorts. In particular, the powerful speaker of the National Assembly, George Dweh, from the LURD faction, was widely known for his involvement in death-squad activities during the presidency of the late Samuel K. Doe (1980–90). Many senior UNMIL officials had served in other UN missions, notably in Bosnia: some expressed their amazement that the UN found itself playing a role in a situation where the leading instigators of a war continued to enjoy such immunity and were even able to use the transitional period to strengthen their positions.

Perhaps for related reasons, the government declined to petition the Nigerian government for the extradition to Sierra Leone of former President **Charles Taylor**, who has been indicted for war crimes by Sierra Leone's special court. At year's end, Taylor continued to live in Calabar, Nigeria, as a guest of the Nigerian government. Although he was reported to have curtailed his earlier communications with politicians and others in Liberia after warnings from his Nigerian hosts, Taylor's presence in the sub-region continued to cast a shadow over Liberian politics. Key associates of Taylor, including his wife, Jewel Howard Taylor, remain in Liberia.

Within some of the factions, even as they were officially transforming themselves into political parties, continuing **factional struggles** affected national security. Inside LURD there was a movement to unseat the movement's chairman, Sekou Conneh. The dissident group was led by military commanders who supported Conneh's estranged wife Aisha. Rival factions fought each other in the Bushrod area of Monrovia – a LURD fiefdom – in August. LURD was also prominent in attempts to replace Gyude Bryant as head of the transitional government, notably in a 26 January joint statement co-signed by the leader of MODEL. These efforts were unsuccessful, and Bryant finished the year in a relatively strong position. However, it is unlikely that he will emerge as a key figure in Liberia's future politics since according to the terms of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, as chairman of the transitional administration he is disqualified from seeking election to the presidency in October 2005.

As evidence mounted of **corruption** among senior government officials, many observers concluded that members of the transitional institutions regarded the interim period as an opportunity to use their official positions to make money in the shortest possible time, since some of them were unlikely to be able to continue in government after the end of the year.

This may have been one factor contributing to the growing perception that the transitional government had little interest in tackling the problems needed to clear the way for an elected government that would restore Liberia to normality.

UNMIL's main concern during the year was **disarmament**. The disarmament exercise had started badly on 7 December 2003, when a first attempt had to be abandoned after administrative problems had led to violent disturbances by former fighters angry at being unable to hand in their weapons for cash. At least eight people were killed, causing UNMIL to suspend the disarmament process pending new arrangements. After the speedy termination of the first attempt at disarmament, a second phase began on 15 April. While the CPA had provided for the establishment of a 'National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration', in practice much of the planning and implementation was the work of a 'Joint Implementation Unit', largely composed of civilian staff, that was under the immediate authority of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) rather than of UNMIL.

The disarmament exercise, substantially completed by 31 October 2004 but extended for a further three weeks in some remote areas, caused considerable **controversy**. This was mostly due to the very high numbers of people registering as ex-combatants and the comparatively small numbers of weapons or munitions that they surrendered. UNMIL had originally estimated that about 38,000 fighters would register for disarmament, becoming eligible for a \$ 300 payment, and it planned further help with rehabilitation and reintegration. Other sources too had made estimates of a roughly comparable order. In regard to numbers of weapons, in February Jacques Klein estimated that there were around three weapons for each combatant in Liberia. However, at the completion of the programme, more than 102,000 people had registered as ex-combatants, handing in more than 27,000 guns and some 6.15 million rounds of ammunition. It was also notable that few heavy weapons were handed in, although the intensive bombardment of Monrovia in mid-2003 had revealed that the factions possessed quite a few heavy artillery pieces. Hence, at the end of the disarmament exercise in November, the UN had collected only one weapon for every three to four people reporting themselves as ex-combatants, and there had been more than twice as many people reporting at disarmament centres as anticipated.

The most likely **explanation** for these surprising figures was that the leaders of former combatant groups had sold many of their heaviest weapons in neighbouring countries, as intelligence sources suggested. Military commanders of armed factions also appeared to have distributed small amounts of ammunition and light weapons to non-combatants who could then deliver them in return for a cash payment of \$ 300, which they were then required to share with the military commander who had provided the ammunition. In this way they were able to benefit from the conditions for registration introduced before the second phase of the disarmament exercise, opening on 15 April, which permitted anyone who produced 150 rounds of ammunition to qualify for processing as an ex-combatant, and not only

people who handed over weapons. Some fighters had already experienced one or even two previous disarmament processes, in Liberia in 1997, but also in Sierra Leone, where some Liberians had also fought.

The fact that a substantially higher number of people were registered as ex-combatants than had been budgeted for left little money for the other leg of the disarmament and reintegration programme, namely provision for the **rehabilitation** of former combatants. By November, only some 11,000 ex-combatants were registered in various UNMIL training or work-creation projects, with almost 5,000 others registered as undergoing formal education, but with no guarantee that they would be able to pay school fees. Aid donors had also established some other job-creation schemes, most notably the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which ran a substantial infrastructure-repair programme that provided work for several thousand more ex-combatants, but this was a rather short-term solution. The risk in the longer term was that tens of thousands of ex-combatants who were unaccounted for after disarmament might turn to robbery or enlist as fighters in wars elsewhere in West Africa. In September, the transitional government and UNMIL circulated to donors a joint document pointing out the security threat posed by ex-fighters that had not received any further training or cash. Chairman Bryant repeatedly called for more money for the fund. UNICEF chief executive Carol Bellamy also criticised donors for failing to fund the resettlement and retraining of former combatants. She did mention, however, that 85% of the former child soldiers that had been associated with armed forces had returned to their families.

Other aspects of dealing with the massive problems of restoring stability to Liberia and establishing an efficient government caused further problems. In mid-year, the World Food Programme was feeding some 490,000 people, including **internally displaced persons** and newly returned **refugees**, as well as malnourished people. By the end of the year, there were still over 300,000 displaced persons, many of them living in camps, waiting to return to their homes, as well as hundreds of thousands of Liberian refugees living in neighbouring countries. The exact population of Liberia is unknown as the last census was in 1984 and years of war have caused massive disruption, but is put by the US government at some 3.2 m.

On a more positive note, there was some progress in establishing a new Liberian **police** force to replace the old force that was largely untrained and unequipped, highly politicised and notoriously corrupt. On 13 July, UNMIL and the transitional government jointly launched a programme to recruit new police officers. The intention was to form a new force of some 3,500 people who would receive training from experts employed by the UN, as well as proper equipment. Progress in reorganising the armed forces was somewhat slower, but by year's end preparations were in hand for a new army to receive training from a US private security company that had previously worked for the UN in Bosnia.

Probably the most serious security concern during the year was the outbreak of **rioting** in a suburb of Monrovia on 28 October. Said to have been sparked off by a disagreement over sales pitches in a market, it soon mobilised ex-fighters of rival factions and took on a

religious form, with attacks on mosques and businesses owned by members of the Mandingo ethnic group, who are generally known as Muslims and who were widely associated with support for the LURD faction. Subsequent reports suggested that the violence had been planned by some ex-Taylor commanders, and that the attacks on mosques were part of a wider strategy to provoke violence on religious grounds. At least 17 people were killed, with similar incidents being reported in other towns, including Kakata, Ganta and Buchanan. The gravity of the incident lay not just in the numbers of casualties and in the damage caused, but also in the indications that some key members of the old armed factions were reorganising and were developing strategies for the future, still based on the use of violence.

Nevertheless, there seemed little doubt that national elections would proceed in October 2005, with the UN and the main international donors strongly rejecting any arguments for postponement. Some 40 people declared themselves as **presidential candidates**, including the former world football star George Weah, who made his announcement on 23 November. Although Weah had almost no political experience, and no experience at all in government, it was generally agreed that this constituted part of his likely political appeal, as he was untainted by participation in Liberia's war, while his name was almost universally known. However, among the candidates who had declared themselves to be running for the presidency in October 2005, there were also plenty of experienced politicians and administrators.

Foreign Affairs

Since mid-2003, the Liberian peace process has received unprecedented outside support, from sub-regional powers and from major donors and the UN. This has occurred at a time when the UN has had major missions in neighbouring Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire. But there was **little effective coordination** between the three missions in regard both to strategic issues and to tactical matters such as disarmament. For much of the year, for example, UNMIL was not deployed at key border crossings with neighbouring countries. This clearly raised questions concerning the possibility of armed groups manipulating the disarmament exercises.

The Liberian government, however, did make efforts to improve its relations with its **neighbours**. On 20 May, Chairman Bryant led a delegation to Guinea in an attempt to revive the Mano River Union. In regard to Sierra Leone in particular, one of the major obstacles was the question of former president Charles Taylor. The special court for Sierra Leone continued to press for his extradition from his home in Calabar, Nigeria. Officers of the special court for Sierra Leone and some US officials confirmed earlier media reports that Charles Taylor had cooperated with al-Qaida both before and after 11 September 2001 – although other US officials, including from leading intelligence agencies, could not confirm this allegation. A senior al-Qaida operative arrested in Pakistan on 25 July, Ahmed

Khalfan Ghailani, suspected of involvement in the 1998 bombing of US embassies in east Africa, was reported to have spent at least three years living in Liberia from the late 1990s.

In regard to the wider world, one of the most important changes in Liberia's foreign relations during the year was its recognition of the People's Republic of **China**. Previously, Liberia had been for some years one of several African countries that had alternated between recognition of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan). This was generally a question of blatant financial interest: the Taylor government had secured extensive financial support from Taiwan, and Taylor was reported to have gone into exile on 11 August 2003 in possession of \$ 3 m given by the Taiwanese government for disarmament. One of the interim government's first acts was to recognise China in place of Taiwan. In January, Beijing deployed 500 troops to the Liberian operation, its biggest-ever commitment to a UN mission. In general, China showed a marked interest in both Liberia and other African countries, most particularly in regard to purchases of minerals and other commodities.

Chairman Bryant travelled extensively during the year, including three visits to the US, during one of which he met US President George W. Bush. On 3 June he addressed the UN Security Council, pleading forcefully – but unsuccessfully – for the lifting of economic sanctions against Liberia (see below). Although the **US government** provided substantial financial help to UNMIL and was offering direct support for specific sectors, such as retraining the Liberian armed forces, US officials made clear that they did not envisage further major aid to Liberia after the termination of the transitional arrangements and the restoration of an elected government.

Socioeconomic Developments

On 5–6 February, a **donor's conference** on Liberian reconstruction was held in New York, co-chaired by Kofi Annan and Colin Powell. It pledged some \$ 520 m, with the US pledging some \$ 245 m for peacekeeping and \$ 200 m for other purposes. However, at the end of the year, it remained unclear how much of this money was still earmarked for Liberia or whether it had been reallocated for other uses.

Both the transitional government and UNMIL continued to radiate optimism about an **early return to normality**, but there was growing evidence of problems. In Monrovia, one of the most contentious issues was the provision of mains electricity, which has not been available for years. Although some progress was made initially through rehabilitation of the national electricity corporation, the modest improvements in electricity supply were soon reversed due to corruption, as officials embezzled money or privately sold fuel and spare parts that were needed for the power supply. Similarly, government promises to reduce the prices of petroleum products and rice were not realised. One of the government's main policies was to centralise revenue collection, but there were consistent reports that much revenue never made its way to the central treasury.

A further example of how government disarray or corruption could have an impact on development concerned the export of a stockpile of hundreds of thousands of tonnes of **iron ore** that had lain on the quayside at Buchanan since the early 1990s. Various international business consortia expressed an interest in buying the stockpile, perhaps as part of a larger deal incorporating rehabilitation of the railway line from the iron ore mines at Yekepa to the port at Buchanan. A Chinese consortium negotiated to buy the Buchanan iron ore stockpile in rather unclear circumstances. Liberian political activists, learning that the iron ore was being loaded on board a Chinese ship, obtained an injunction from the supreme court preventing the sale of the ore. Nevertheless, loading continued in defiance of the court order and the Chinese ship sailed away fully loaded on 15 September. It is unclear precisely how much money was paid for the ore, or which officials received it.

International **sanctions** continued on various economic activities, including Liberia's diamond and timber trades. These were originally imposed by UN Security Council Resolution 1343 in May 2001 as a means of preventing then President Taylor's government from supporting the destabilisation of Sierra Leone, but international attention had gradually turned to using sanctions as a way of putting pressure on the Liberian government generally. The domination of the National Transitional Government of Liberia by nominees of the former armed factions threw doubt on the government's ability to inspire international confidence that it had eliminated the risk of abuse or smuggling in regard to timber and diamonds in particular. MODEL nominees had control of the FORESTRY DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY AND THE BUREAU OF MARITIME AFFAIRS, enabling this former armed faction to continue profiting from national resources much as it did when it was still a rebel group. Largely for this reason, the UN had still not lifted its sanctions on Liberia by year's end. On 17 June, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1549, re-establishing a panel of experts, pursuant to Resolution 1521 of 2003, to conduct a report on the violations of sanctions. Three months earlier, on 12 March, the UN Security Council unanimously agreed to freeze Taylor's assets to prevent them from being used to destabilise the country. Timber and rubber are Liberia's main export items, with the country earning more than \$ 78 m and more than \$ 57 m annually from timber and rubber exports respectively. Liberia also has the world's second-largest ship registry, with more than 1,800 vessels registered, including 35% of the world's tanker fleet.

The scale of Liberia's economic problems is daunting. Its debt is generally estimated to be a little over \$ 3 bn, and continues to accrue interest. This sum consists of debts to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other multilateral institutions, plus Germany, France, Japan, the US and the African Development Bank. The transitional government, on the other hand, inherited a treasury containing just \$ 2 m. In his annual state of the nation address on 26 January, Chairman Bryant recorded that government had revenue of \$ 21.1 m – largely from its ship registry – and expenditure of \$ 17 m. There was considerable improvement in this regard: during the year from 1 January, actual **revenue** collected amounted to \$ 68.2 m, while expenditure was \$ 67.8 m.

Liberia is often excluded from **statistical tables** due to the poor quality of its figures. However, it is reckoned that more than 80% of the population is formally unemployed, and 74% has no access to safe drinking water. Life expectancy is 48 years and infant mortality 157 deaths per 1,000 births.

West Africa continues to attract interest in the **oil** industry on account of the ongoing discoveries of important offshore reserves. In regard to Liberia too there was interest in offshore oil exploration. Liberia's offshore waters are currently divided into 17 blocks of unusually small size, an arrangement made by the Taylor government that was presumably intended to maximise the possible signature bonuses to be gained from contracts for exploration. One of the first actions of the new administration led by Chairman Bryant was to license the offshore oil-concession blocks.

Negotiations on oil exploration, and the controversy surrounding the export of iron ore from Buchanan, illustrated one of the main questions surrounding the functioning of a transitional government in the presence of a major UN mission: namely, whether the National Transitional Government of Liberia had the authority to sign concession agreements and enter into other long-term **contracts**. There was no resolution of this question by year's end.

Stephen Ellis